

# Athabascan chief travels to human rights meet

by Tom Thompson  
Tanana Chiefs Conference

Randy Mayo, chief of the Stevens Village Tribal Council, traveled to Vienna, Austria, in June to attend the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights.

"I wasn't there as an official delegate, I went there on my own as an observer," Mayo says. He expressed gratitude for the financial support of the Doyon Foundation, which made the trip possible.

Mayo said he learned a lot from what he saw and heard at the conference. He spent his time "where the real action was," with the non-governmental organizations (known as NGOs). About 5,000 people attended the conference.

"Upstairs were the delegates from the (UN member) nations. Downstairs were the non-governmental organizations," says Mayo, noting that many of the NGOs are fighting for their human rights, just as tribes in Alaska are doing.

"Stevens Village never gave up any of our traditional lands or our rights. Now the state claims the navigable waterways and the trans-Alaska oil pipeline crosses our traditional lands illegally. The Dall River—a special place to us—people come in with no respect for that place or for us as a people and they trash the place," says Mayo.

Before going to the meeting, Mayo didn't really know much about the situations of other indigenous populations, but notes "I do know what I've lived as a Native person. Growing up in Fairbanks, I was made to feel less by the dominant culture. I knew I was learning an alien language and culture. Growing up learning more about George Washington than my own ancestors, that is terrible."

Mayo was born in Stevens and grew up mostly in Fairbanks, although he returned regularly to the village to fish and trap with his father. He was elected chief of the Stevens Village IRA Council in January, 1993.

At the conference he found that all over the globe, striking similarities exist in the treatment of indigenous peoples. There are some 300 million indigenous peoples struggling for their rights against colonial governments worldwide, Mayo says.

"It is exactly the same situation worldwide. Indigenous peoples are suppressed and treated like children, controlled by governments. In Alaska we don't have (blatant) rights violations like shooting people, but we do have human rights violations. An alien culture has been shoved down our throats. I learned some of what is going on in other parts of the world to indigenous people and shared my personal views and



Randy Mayo, Chief, Steven's Village

experiences about what's happening in Alaska. We're a distinct people—a nation—yet we're prisoners in our own land," Mayo says.

What Mayo saw at the conference was the big UN member nations upstairs still suppressing the non-governmental organizations below, but "the NGOs were like a watchdog—pushing the people in

power upstairs."

Chief Mayo says he came away from the conference with a direction and many contacts. "I learned a little bit about how you go about it (fighting for his peoples' rights). When the government of the occupying force won't recognize you, what's the alternative? It gave me more conviction to fight for the

truth. I can't live a lie, a false existence."

Mayo strongly favors retaining the ancient knowledge and traditional ways of the Athabascan ancestors.

"Government handouts are ruining the people. It's like hand feeding a kid way beyond the time he's supposed to be eating on his own. What money there is in the village goes outside—we buy our groceries, boats, motors, snowmachines and so forth in Fairbanks and Anchorage, and support their economies. In many cases these are the same people coming into our country with their ignorance. They regard our traditional lands as their playground."

Stevens Village has a strong, vocal and articulate spokesman in their tribal chief. Mayo says he is still learning about international conferences, about the situations, victories and defeats of other indigenous groups, but one thing he does know is that Athabascan law—unwritten, but still law—precedes American law by thousands of years.

"We're not a minority—we're a nation," says Mayo. "We're not going to go away. They could kill me or shut me up, but they can't kill the spirit in our hearts—the truth. It is time to assert our rights."

Tom Thompson is editor of *The Council*, newspaper of the Tanana Chiefs Conference of Fairbanks.